



## 89: Insecure by cali-chan

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**Summary:** "I'm not jealous of her," [El] threw back, still glaring, but where a moment ago she'd just seemed angry, now she also looked hurt. "I'm mad at YOU." PG-13, romance/drama/fluff, Mike/Eleven, post-S2.

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*"I'm not jealous of her," [El] threw back, still glaring, but where a moment ago she'd just seemed angry, now she also looked hurt. "I'm mad at you."*

**Note:** I've been itching to write an actual argument between these two since *Raindrops*, and a long while ago, **juliadelg** on FFN mentioned interest in seeing Eleven jealous. Normally jealousy plots are not my kinda thing (although in this case it's canon, technically), but my brain recently decided to put these two things together, so here you go. Hope you like this, Julia!

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The thing about a sleepy little suburb like Hawkins, Mike thought, was that there was always some kind of drive going on for *something*.

Nancy used to say that's because people in the suburbs liked to eschew the way of life of the city, but they still wanted to feel important enough to be a part of it in some way. Mike didn't know if she was right, all he knew was that they had a hell of a lot of drives for stuff, and somehow his mother was *always* involved with them.

As the tail end of winter rolled around this year, it brought a couple of nasty storms with it. The Midwest had been hit up to a point, but they could handle snowstorms and got through it fine. When the storm front led to increased spring rains, however, New England caught the worst of it, and how. Maine in particular had been hit with catastrophic flooding, and that's why several churches in Hawkins, as well as the PTO, were running a canned goods drive for the affected.

And of course, Karen Wheeler managed to rope Mike and the rest of the party into helping out, because *There are people out there who are having a tough time of things, Michael, and those of us who were lucky enough not to be touched by it have an obligation to help*, and that's how

they all ended up in the gym of Hawkins Middle receiving and cataloguing and packing food from people who did not understand that fruit baskets were most decidedly *not* in the non-perishable category.

While the rest of his friends had been assigned to different tasks, Mike's job was to take the canned food back to a storage room, where he then had to make sure they were packed as efficiently as possible, tape the boxes closed, label them according to the contents and then put them up on the shelves they had set up for that express purpose. It was an okay task; sure, he had to lift boxes at one point, which was not his strong suit, but at least he wasn't partnered with random people. He really wasn't interested in making small talk with his mother's PTO friends about his plans for college, or lack thereof (he was just a sophomore, for God's sake).

He was just finishing taping up a box of canned vegetables when a fellow classmate of his walked into the storage room. Tilly, or Tammy, or whatever her name was— she was a freshman and a recent inductee to the cheerleading team. Mike couldn't remember if he had any classes with her, but he'd seen her around school hanging out with Stacey and the rest of the popular crowd. "Hi," she said when she saw him there.

"Hey," he replied almost absentmindedly, searching his pockets for the marker he'd been using to label the boxes.

"Ms. Trudy sent me to ask if we're accepting blankets," Tammy added — he was like 70% sure that was her name— looking around at all the shelves with boxes around them in something like wonder. Ms. Trudy was the name of one of the food drive organizers, who should probably know the answer to her own question better than anyone, given that she was the one who decided what they were accepting or not.

Mike took a second to uncap his marker and write a large "VG" on the front and sides of the box he'd just taped closed before answering. "Um, yeah," he told Tammy with a nod. "Over... there," he added, pointing in the direction of a shelf where a few boxes with the label "BL" could be found.

"Ah, cool. I'll tell her, then," Tammy said, looking in that direction. Mike expected her to just walk back to the gym now that she had the answer she'd come for, but instead, out of the corner of his eye he saw her shuffle closer to him, leaning her forearms on the table he was using as a packing station. "Hey, uh... Mike, right?"

He turned to look at her for a second before pushing the vegetables box to the side and moving on to unfold another empty box. "Yeah," he confirmed as he got the box ready for packing.

"You're, like... really good at math, right?" she further asked, taking a step closer. She sighed. "Here's the thing: I'm really struggling in pre-calc, and if I flunk out my mom will make me quit cheer. That *can't* happen. I would totally die. So I kind of really need a tutor." She gave him a hopeful smile. "Any chance you could help me with that?"

Mike hesitated. He probably *could* help her with pre-calc, but then again, he'd never talked to this girl once before. Why should he give up the time he could be spending with his friends or his girlfriend to help her out? Plus, she hung out with Troy and his fellow jocks. The last thing Mike needed was to give them further ammunition to insult him behind his back. "Uh, I don't know if I'll have a lot of free time since the end of the semester is coming up..."

"Oh, I'll totally pay you, that's not a problem," Tammy insisted, and that gave Mike pause. He was going to get his driver's license soon, and his parents were letting him use the station wagon like Nancy had, so long as he paid for his own gas. Which meant he needed money. His father wanted him to get "a real job," but maybe tutoring was a better solution; at least he'd be doing something he was good at.

Before he could ponder this further, however, Tammy intervened again. "Listen, you don't have to say yes right now." She laid a hand on his arm with that insistent smile. "Say, why don't I give you my number? That way if you're interested, you can just... give me a call," she added with a small shrug. "Hand me your marker?" she asked, upturning her other hand toward him.

Before he could make a decision one way or the other, however, one of the boxes he'd loaded onto the shelf unit right beside the table he

was working at— the one on the very top shelf labeled "SC" for "Soups and Condiments"— fell to the ground just beside them. The box burst open immediately like the tape he'd so meticulously applied wasn't even there, and most of the cans fell out, including a can of ketchup that hit the ground at exactly the right angle to knock off the upper ring and splatter ketchup everywhere. Including Tammy's leggings.

She gasped in dismay and Mike groaned "Oh, shit!" partly because he wouldn't have wished for anyone to have ketchup spilled on them, but mostly because now he'd have to clean everything and pack those cans back up again.

As he knelt down to pick up some of the cans, Tammy hurriedly offered to help. "I can come back right away, I just need to get this stuff off me first—"

"Nah, don't worry about it," Mike assured her, so annoyed at having to re-do all of this, that he'd rather she just leave so he didn't end up being rude to her by accident. "Go clean yourself up, I got this." After all, it wasn't her fault he'd set the box down too close to the edge of the shelf... but wait, had he?

"Okay, if you're sure..." she said, but Mike wasn't really paying attention; he was looking over at the shelf unit and wondering how in the world the box had managed to fall down on its own. Just as he was contemplating this, he heard someone else come into the room and turned his head just enough to see El walking toward them, a clipboard in her hands.

"Okay, I'll see you later, I guess?" Tammy said, spinning on her heel just to almost collide with Eleven. "Oh! Sorry," she said, walking around El on her way out of the storage room, probably heading for the nearest bathroom.

El didn't even take one look at him when she stood by the corner of his worktable, looking up at the shelf unit on the right side of the room. She was muttering under her breath like she was counting, and every once in a while she'd write something down in her clipboard. They probably had her doing inventory.

"Can you believe this?" Mike asked in a frustrated tone, shaking his head. "The box just fell off for no reason. Now I have to pick all this stuff up..." Her back was to him, and she kept working on her count like he hadn't said anything. That was strange. "El?"

She turned around to count the boxes on the shelf unit to the left of the room, though she couldn't come any closer because of all the stuff that was still spilled on the floor between the shelf and where she stood. She started counting again from afar, still not sparing a glance at him or at the mess he was supposed to be cleaning up. "Hey, what's going on?" he tried again. She didn't respond this time either, and it was starting to weird him out. Had he done something wrong? "Are you mad at me, or something?" he asked warily.

"You'll make me lose count," was all she said in response, and in a rather harsh tone at that. It shocked him because he hardly ever heard her use that tone with him.

She turned in his direction, but still looking *past* him rather than *at* him, so she could count the boxes still on the shelf at his back. He stood there watching her for a moment, trying to think of what to say to her, given that he didn't know what her problem was.

Then he saw her narrow her eyes a little as she counted, and an errant thought crossed his mind. "Hey, wait..." he started, brows already drawing together because there was no way... right? "Was this... was this you?" he asked, signaling at the mess at his feet. No, that couldn't be right. But then again, he was pretty sure he'd set the box down far back enough on the shelf that it couldn't have fallen on its own unless the entire shelf came down. And that was the *only* box that had toppled over. What other explanation was there?

She remained quiet, but he saw her purse her lips and he knew he had his answer. He felt the familiar bubble of anger rising up in his chest. "Seriously, El?!" he asked, glaring at her. She continued writing on her clipboard like nothing was happening. He groaned. "Why would you do that? That's not funny, it's going to take me forever to pack this stuff all over again!"

She finished counting, and only then did she finally look at him. Her eyes were hard. Yeah, she was definitely mad at him. "You should've

accepted Tammy's help," she declared curtly and turned right around, shoulders squared as she walked out the door, leaving Mike behind to stare at her retreating back, slackjawed.

He wanted to run after her and ask her what the hell was going on, but he knew if he left the storage room in its current state of messiness and it got back to his mother, he'd be grounded faster than he could blink, so a confrontation with his girlfriend would have to wait. With a sigh, he headed to the nearest janitor's closet to find a mop or something he could use to clean up the ketchup spill.

It took him nearly 20 extra minutes to get everything clean and the box packed and stacked all over again, and even then he knew his mother was probably going to be mad at him anyway because there were likely a lot more cans backlogged in the gym now waiting for pick-up. But he couldn't wait any longer, so when he got to the gym, instead of heading toward the rapidly-growing mountain of stuff to organize, he went straight for the "reception" table, where El and Will were stationed so they could greet people and tell them where to take what kinds of donations.

He walked all the way around the table until he was on El's side, leaning into the table so he could speak to her in a low tone. "Can you come with me for a sec?"

"I have to help here," she replied in a similar volume. But once again she wasn't looking at him, and he had a feeling her refusal was less about the job she was doing and more about avoiding him.

He wasn't going to let her off that easy. "Well, we're not getting that many people coming in right now," he said a little louder, so their friend could hear. "I'm sure Will can hold the fort here for a little bit, right, Will? Do you mind if I take El away for a moment?"

"Ah, not at all," Will said, looking surprised to be included in the conversation. "Go ahead, I can handle things here," he added, helpful as always. Mike turned to look at El again, expectant, and after a second or two she finally sighed, giving in.

They went to the nearest locker room off to the side of the gym—it was the boys' locker room, but it didn't really matter since no one



was using it that day, and Max had cured him of those hangups a long time ago anyway— so that they could talk in private. Or *he* could talk, at least, given that the second the door swung closed behind them, El crossed her arms and looked at him expectantly.

Of course, that's when Mike realized he hadn't really planned on what he was going to say, so he went for the obvious: "Okay, what the hell is your problem?"

She scoffed as if offended. "My problem?"

"Yes, yours!" he retorted, just as offended that she was trying to put... whatever her reasons were... on him. "I was just in there doing what I was told to do, and suddenly you come in and use your powers— *in front of other people*, might I add— to knock down that box, which not only set me back half an hour, but you also could've seriously hurt someone!" He frowned in disappointment. "What is going on? This isn't like you."

She didn't respond to his question; instead, she just glared at him some more. "The box wasn't going to hit her," she snapped back with a huff. "She was too far away, clinging to you!"

It was the emphasis on that last bit that finally made things click for Mike: the way she'd come in and refused to even look at him, her parting words as she left the storage room earlier. "Wait, is that it?" he asked. "You're jealous of Tammy? El, come on..."

"I'm not jealous of her," she threw back, still glaring, but where a moment ago she'd just seemed angry, now she also looked hurt. "I'm mad at *you*." The accusatory tone was like a knife to his gut, even though he was pretty sure he had no reason to feel guilty.

"Why?" he asked, frustrated that she had some kind of issue with... something he still wasn't quite sure of... but instead of coming to him about it so he could explain whatever it was, she simply decided to shut him out and take her anger out on the work he'd been slaving on for hours. "What did I do that was so wrong? I was just talking to her! Am I not supposed to talk to other girls now or—"

"No," she cut him off abruptly. "You can talk to other girls. You're

*supposed* to tell the ones who are *flirting with you* that you have a girlfriend."

Okay, now she'd lost him. "What are you talking about? She wasn't flirting with me!" He tried thinking back to the short conversation to see if maybe he'd missed something, but no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn't see it. "She was just asking me to tutor her for pre-calc."

She groaned and rolled her eyes at him. "You can't be this dumb." She shook her head, acting like *she* was the one who was disappointed (at *him*) now. "She was clinging to your arm. She was about to give you her phone number."

"For a legitimate reason!" Okay, yeah, he could understand how in certain other circumstances, a girl giving a guy her phone number *might* be construed as flirting, but not in *these* circumstances. And not to Mike Wheeler. That kinda stuff just didn't happen to people like him. "Come on, why would Tammy be flirting with me? She's a freaking cheerleader!"

"Oh, so she's too pretty to like you?" she asked in return.

Before he even realized what he was saying, he blurted out "Yes!" Her eyebrows rose high on her forehead. That's when he processed what he'd just said, and cringed. "I mean, no!" He shook his head, trying to fix it. "I mean— I guess she's objectively pretty, it's not like I'm blind—" Wait, no, that was *worse*. "But not like in a special way or anything! She's just, like—" Eventually he gave up with a sigh, running a hand over his face. "This is not coming out well..."

"No, no, keep going," she encouraged him sarcastically, hands on her hips.

"What I'm trying to say," he started again through clenched teeth, "is that it's a school hierarchy thing." El had already spent a year and a half in the school system, and she had experienced for herself the world of high school cliques, but maybe she didn't quite *get* it yet. "It has nothing to do with whether she's pretty or not. Cheerleaders just don't flirt with guys like me."

She frowned again, but this time she seemed more confused than anything. "Why? What's wrong with you?"

He paused to look at her for a second, wondering if that was a rhetorical question. But no, El wasn't like that. "What do you mean, why? I'm a nerd. The guys and I, we're all nerds. Completely at the bottom of the totem pole. You know this."

"So?" she asked, and she seemed genuinely dumbfounded. "I like you. I like that you're a nerd. Maybe other girls do, too."

Even though he was still annoyed at her attitude, his heart did something of a backflip at her words. It was amazing to him that it could still produce such a reaction in him whenever she mentioned her feelings for him. He wondered if he would ever stop reacting that way to even the slightest declaration of affection from her. He hoped not.

He resisted the urge to point out that she was just saying that because she didn't know any better—he knew that was just a product of his own insecurities. It was still hard for him to believe that any girl would like him that way, let alone one as amazing as El; he wasn't particularly good-looking, or strong, or athletic, or any of the things that girls apparently went for. But he didn't doubt El's feelings for him. He couldn't. He knew the bond between them wasn't something he could explain with logic or with the simple rules of teenage attraction. It went beyond all of that.

When it came to anyone else, though... "Okay, let's say for the sake of the argument that she *was* flirting with me," he posited, deciding to go in a different direction. "How would I even know? I've never even talked to her before. I could barely remember her name!"

She stared at him cautiously for a second, gauging whether he was telling the truth or not. "You seriously couldn't tell?" she asked, somehow managing to sound both suspicious and hopeful at the same time.

"No," he insisted. "Look, you might have missed this, but I don't know how to talk to girls," he explained in an agitated manner. "And in the interest of not making an idiot out of myself, I never even wanted to!"

He signaled to her with one hand. "You're the exception because you're the only girl I've ever liked, but the rest of them I don't even care about, so how am I supposed to know if they're just being friendly, or—"

"Really?" she interrupted his tirade in a surprised tone.

"Uh, yeah," he reiterated, a little confused that his perennial awkwardness wasn't already painfully obvious to her. "I never really bothered talking to girls unless I had to for school, so I don't really know how they think or if they're actually saying what it sounds like they're saying—"

"No," she cut him off again. "Am I really the only girl you've ever liked," she added, correcting his initial understanding of her question.

He got her meaning then, and immediately he could feel himself start to blush. He hadn't meant to say that, but once again his rambling got the better of him. "Oh, well..." he stammered as she waited for his answer. "I mean— there's Princess Leia, I guess, but she doesn't really count." He finished the sentence in a really fast mumble, looking down at his feet out of embarrassment.

(Well, it was a good thing she liked nerds, he figured, because by dating him she'd basically hit the mother lode).

He heard more than saw her take a couple of steps closer to him, and when he did finally sneak a glance at her, he saw that the corners of her lips were quirking up. "You're so stupid," she said, her mouth finally drawing into that small smile of hers he loved so much. She stretched out a hand for him to take. Just that was enough for the last remnants of his earlier annoyance to finish dissipating.

He accepted her grasp and tugged her closer, his other hand coming to rest on her waist. "I probably am," he conceded, realizing now that his short conversation with Tammy could be interpreted in different ways depending on the person. "Look, I can't exactly start every conversation I have with a new person with 'Hi, before you talk to me you should know I have a girlfriend.' That'd be kind of weird and conceited," he argued, hopefully convincingly.

"But," he continued, attempting a compromise, "if it really bothers you that much, I can try to be better at figuring out when girls are flirting with me. *If* it ever happens again," he pointed out. "Or maybe we should come up with some kind of signal for those kinds of situations. Like they do in football to tell the players which throw is coming."

"That's baseball," she corrected him with a chuckle.

"Yeah, whatever," he waved it off. It was some sport; he didn't really care. "What I'm saying is: maybe we should try something like that first, before you jump straight to attempted murder."

She rolled her eyes again. "The box wasn't going to hit her," she repeated.

"Okay," Mike conceded. "I know you weren't really trying to hurt her, El, but it's still not cool." He shook his head. "You can't get like this. It makes me feel like shit, and moreover, someone might figure things out about your powers. Do you know how terrifying that is to me?"

That last point seemed to really hit home. She lowered her gaze and bit her lip. "I'm sorry," she whispered, contrite. "It wasn't on purpose. I just... sometimes I get scared."

"Scared of what?" he asked, raising her face with a finger under her chin so she would look up at him again. For the first time since they'd come into the locker room, he caught a glimpse of vulnerability in her eyes, and it tugged at his heart.

She shrugged. "That you'll meet some other girl. Someone prettier." She pursed her lips. "And then you won't want to be with me anymore."

He couldn't help it; his heart stuttered a little bit. "That's..." He breathed out heavily. "That's normal, El. Everybody feels jealous sometimes. You don't think I feel sick to my stomach every time I see you talking to some super popular guy?" He'd had that happen several times, especially back during freshman year, when El was still "the new girl" and everyone in the school seemed to want to hang out with her, including the jocks and the artsy crowd and even *Troy* (who

was too stupid to recognize her now that her hair was longer).

She looked at him like she was surprised by that, which he was glad for, because he tried his hardest not to let it show when he did feel jealous— at least not to her. "Yeah, I do, sometimes," he admitted somewhat reluctantly. "The only difference is that I don't have superpowers, and I know if I try to punch them I'll only get my ass kicked," he added with a self-deprecating snort that made her frown.

"But," he continued before she could rebut his assertion, "then you'd come back to our table and smile at me, and hold my hand, and kiss me—" He squeezed her hand, fingers entangled with hers. "—And I'd realize that I was just being stupid and insecure, because in the end, you want to be with *me*, even if it's hard to believe."

He shook his head, staring deeply into her eyes. "But that's the thing: if you're ever having any doubts about me, or about *us*, there's no need to do anything rash. Just come talk to me about it. That way if I messed up somehow, I can apologize and try to fix it. Or if you're just feeling insecure for some reason, I can at least try and make you feel better," he offered earnestly. "I never want you to feel sad or upset because of me, okay? Promise me you'll do that."

She nodded, leaning forward to rest her forehead against his. "Yes. If you promise, too."

"Of course. I promise," he assured her right away. "And for the record, I could never leave you for someone prettier, because no one is prettier than you," he quipped before leaning in to peck her lips. "Or sweeter." Another peck. "Or cooler." And one more before pulling back with a smile.

She smiled shyly right back at him. "And I don't care if you're not popular," she told him, "I'll always want to be with you." She leaned forward to kiss him, too, but she clearly wasn't intending just a peck, as it ended up turning into a much more involved embrace.

He leaned back against the gym locker he'd been standing in front of this whole time, pulling her back with him, her arms around his waist pinning him against the metal. He lifted a hand so it could get lost in her hair, which was only half-tied back, and he loved running

his hands through the soft curls as he explored her mouth and drew her closer.

Her soft little hand snuck under his polo to caress the small of his back just along the edge of his waistline, and he hummed his enjoyment against her lips a little louder than he should. "Your hands are cold," he said, breathing heavily as he pulled back for a breath.

"Mmm," she murmured as she nuzzled his neck with her nose. "You like it." She started dropping kisses against his jaw and he fought the urge to vocalize his pleasure even louder.

"I really do," he admitted, pulling her face to his so he could kiss her again, and then there were no more words. Dimly, Mike was aware that they were both supposed to be doing other things at that moment, but in all honesty he could barely remember what those tasks were. All he could think about, all he could feel at that moment was her, and she seemed just as into it.

That's probably why neither of them heard the door swing open.

"Mike, are you here? I forgot to give you my— Oh! I'm sorry, I'll— I'll just go."

They sprung apart abruptly at the interruption, barely catching a quick glimpse of a newly ketchup-free Tammy as she hurried out of the locker room, door left swinging back and forth in the wake of her hasty retreat.

"Well," Mike commented in a throaty, breathless voice, "I guess now she knows I have a girlfriend."

El bit her lip for a second before letting out a snort that turned into a full-on laugh. Soon enough they were both cracking up, leaning against each other in their mirth. Eventually, as their laughter started dying down, he pulled her in for another kiss.

They got away with making out in the boys' locker room for a few more minutes, at least until they heard Mike's mother calling out to them from the floor of the gym, gearing up to give them both a lecture for shirking their assigned duties.

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**Notes:** I just want to state for the record that I am a masterful multitasker, as proven by the fact that I can write fanfiction about two young teens in love while stewing in my anxiety about Millie's Instagram messages to the Sartorius kid. Also, I clearly live a zero hypocrisy life. -rolls eyes-

There really *was* a major flood in Maine in 1987— it was declared "disastrous" on April 1st— which caused over 2000 homes to be flooded, several important pieces of infrastructure to be damaged or just plain washed away by the water, and over \$100 million in losses (back then; by 2018 standards the net loss would be more than double).

I could use more people to fangirl over this show with me so feel free to hit me up on Tumblr at girls-are-weird, or better yet, on Twitter at girls\_are\_weird because I don't check my Tumblr enough but I'm on Twitter almost literally 24/7, and that's where you're most likely to find me freaking out at random hours of the day about the Duffers leaving the show (thank the gods of Netflix that turned out to be just a rumor!).